DOCKET NO. SA-516 APPENDIX S

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD WASHINGTON, DC

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT NYANG SGT. CRAIG JOHNSON JANUARY 13, 1997 (25 pages)

Τ	BEFORE THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
2	NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
3	WASHINGTON, D.C. 20594
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5	X
6	IN THE MATTER OF TWA FLIGHT :
7	800; INTERVIEW OF: :
8	CRAIG JOHNSON. :
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13	TAPE TRANSCRIPTION
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15	The above entitled matter came on for interview
16	pursuant to notice before NORM WIEMEYER, NTSB Official
17	at the New York Air National Facilities in Westhampton
18	Beach, New York, on January 13, 1997.
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1	<u>APPEARANCES</u> :
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3	NORM WIEMEYER
4	NTSB Official
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1	INDEX
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3	<u>WITNESS</u> :
4	CRAIG JOHNSON/Para-rescueman, New York Air National
5	Guard.
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11	(Tape 4, Side A, first interview.)
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19	(No exhibits were presented or accepted into evidence
20	at or as a result of this interview.)
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1	PROCEEDINGS
2	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. This is an interview
3	conducted at the Air National Guard facilities at the
4	New York Air National Guard. The date today is the
5	13th of January, 1997.
6	Would you please state your full name and
7	spell your last name?
8	MR. JOHNSON: Craig C. Johnson,
9	J-O-H-N-S-O-N.
10	MR. WIEMEYER: And could you give us a local
11	address, please?
12	MR. JOHNSON: 286 Dayton Avenue, Manorville,
13	New York, 11949.
14	MR. WIEMEYER: And what is your occupation
15	with the Air National Guard?
16	MR. JOHNSON: I'm a para-rescueman.
17	MR. WIEMEYER: And what is your civilian
18	occupation?
19	MR. JOHNSON: I'm a full-time para-rescueman
20	with the Air National Guard.
21	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Thank you.
22	What was your exposure to the accident
23	involving TWA Flight 800?
24	MR. JOHNSON: On the night of the accident of
25	TWA Flight 800 I was doing a parachute drop here on the
	GIRTHIY WILL DEPORTING

1	base at Suffolk Suffolk County Airport. And I was
2	loading my parachute gear after the jump into the
3	flatbed truck. And as I reached up to close the top of
4	the truck I saw an object in the sky.
5	MR. WIEMEYER: Could you describe that
6	what you viewed?
7	MR. JOHNSON: I saw I saw an orange-
8	reddish circle-like object rapidly descending out of
9	the sky, for approximately six to seven seconds. And
10	at and it and then it then it blew up into a
11	fireball of flames and smoke, and then it it fell
12	fell out of sight.
13	MR. WIEMEYER: At that time that you
14	witnessed this did you have any idea what you were
15	viewing?
16	MR. JOHNSON: No. Until until I saw the
17	fireball explosion at that point I knew that it
18	it had to be an airplane. But prior to that, what I
19	had seen falling out of the sky, I knew it was moving
20	too fast to be to be an airplane. And I didn't know
21	what it was at first.
22	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. The object that you
23	first saw falling out of the sky prior to the fireball,
24	could you give as detailed some more detail on that?
25	MR. JOHNSON: It to me what it looked

1	like to me at first because it'd shocked me. I'd
2	never seen anything like it before. It it just
3	looked like a red a circle dime a dime a
4	reddish-orange dime falling out of the sky at such a
5	rapid descent that I knew well, I had felt that
6	whatever it was it it if it was normal it
7	was if it was an airplane it was in it was in
8	serious trouble. Or I thought it might've been a
9	meteor, or something, coming down.
LO	That's my first first thought I said,
L1	that's got to be some kind of meteor coming out of
12	the coming out of the sky.
L3	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Did you see any streaks
L 4	through the sky, or anything like that, prior to that
15	event? Or was that flash was the first event that you
16	saw?
17	MR. JOHNSON: No. From from what I recall
18	and I watched this thing for a good five or six,
19	seven seconds. I saw no I saw no flashes, or or
20	anything that I could tell was going coming from the
21	ground up. What I saw the whole time was coming from
22	the from from altitude high up rapidly descending
23	down.
24	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. From the time that you
25	first noticed something and directed your attention to

1	it, did the object move horizontally at all? Or did it
2	go vertical right away?
3	MR. JOHNSON: The the object was was
4	was falling down from a clock position, it it
5	would be from about a about a 3:00 o'clock position
6	heading towards a 7:00 6:30, 7:00 o'clock position
7	coming out of the sky.
8	MR. WIEMEYER: Well, would it have been
9	travelling in
10	MR. JOHNSON: From right to left. And from I
11	was watching it it was definitely from it was coming
12	from west to east.
13	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Have any ideas,
14	interpretation, of distance and altitude from where you
15	were located?
16	MR. JOHNSON: In my first report I think I
17	reported it I thought around 10,000 feet altitude.
18	Because
19	MR. WIEMEYER: And you were located here on
20	the airport?
21	MR. JOHNSON: I was here on the airport. And
22	we do parachute jumps at 10,000 feet, 9,000 feet,
23	13,000 feet; as low as 1,500 feet. And I think I've
24	got a pretty good pretty good I'm a pretty good
25	judge of altitude when I'm when I can see something

1	because of jumping and pulling ground party, and that.
2	And I thought it was I when it first
3	when the report first came out they said the object
4	I think they said it exploded at, you know, a very low
5	altitude. And I knew that what I was seeing was coming
6	from nine, 10,000 feet. And blow and when it blew
7	up I thought my report was it was about I don't
8	know anywhere from I think at two to 3,000 feet when it
9	when I saw the fireball explosion.
10	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.
11	MR. JOHNSON: 1,500.
12	MR. WIEMEYER: When you saw this thing, right
13	at the initial stages
14	MR. JOHNSON: Right.
15	MR. WIEMEYER: and your attention was
16	attracted to that area, did you see anything else out
17	on the peripheral that attracted your attention in
18	addition to that, once you looked into that part of the
19	sky?
20	MR. JOHNSON: Not that I can honestly recall.
21	Because this this object that I spotted caught my
22	attention because I'd never seen anything like it
23	before.
24	Possibly in the very, very instance that I
25	saw it in the beginning I might I might have seen

1	something else, other than that object coming down to
2	the explosion. And and I had told this to the FBI
3	guys. I said, you know you know, there was a reason
4	why I had looked up in the sky. You know, I didn't all
5	of sudden just kind of notice a red I don't think I
6	did. I think I noticed, you know, maybe something else
7	prior to that. But
8	MR. WIEMEYER: You don't really have a
9	MR. JOHNSON: But I can't really bring it
10	back out of my out of my mind.
1	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Could
.2	MR. JOHNSON: But I
.3	MR. WIEMEYER: it have been the sun or
.4	something a reflection off of an
.5	MR. JOHNSON: No.
-6	MR. WIEMEYER: airplane, or anything like
.7	that?
.8	MR. JOHNSON: No. It no. I knew that
19	that object that I saw when it exploded I knew that was
20	an airplane. And I knew I'd watched it for five or six
21	seconds before it broke. I knew at that point that was
22	an airplane.
23	I ran back here. I told our Ops people that
24	an airplane had just exploded. And then I went out on
25	a helicopter and did some and did searching for the

1	wreckage and the bodies.
2	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. When you you got the
3	point in the sequence where the big fireball appeared.
4	Did you watch it all the way to the surface? Or did it
5	disappear from sight before it hit the surface?
6	What
7	MR. JOHNSON: Well
8	MR. WIEMEYER: what transpired there?
9	MR. JOHNSON: It it exploded in like, a
10	mushroom type of left/right type of thing, and just
11	floated down. And from where I was standing on the
12	drop zone, which is I think it's maybe a mile from
13	here. I think total distance I think was only, like,
14	16 miles from the actual spot that it landed in the
15	ocean and from where I was.
16	I did I watched it come down into the
17	ground, but I didn't know whether it was way out in the
18	ocean, or it maybe on the horizon. I I couldn't
19	really tell. I couldn't tell. I I knew it was far
20	away. But the distance I I didn't I didn't know.
21	I mean, I watched 'til I couldn't see anymore. I
22	watched it descend 'til I couldn't see anymore. Then I
23	looked at my two friends.
24	And at first when I saw it before it
25	exploded, I looked at them and I said, hey, do you see

1	what I see? 'Cause I was wanting to make sure that I
2	wasn't seeing something that nobody else was seeing it
3	By the time I got their attention to look up where I
4	was looking, that's when it exploded. So, they didn't
5	actually watch it from a vantage point until it
6	exploded like like I had seen.
7	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. I I'd like, if you
8	can, compare the size of the fireball
9	MR. JOHNSON: That's
10	MR. WIEMEYER: to what occurred first to
11	attract your attention?
12	MR. JOHNSON: The size of the fireball
13	compared to the object? I would say the object in
14	proportion it would be the size of a dime, rapidly
15	descending out of the sky. And the and the and
16	the fireball was the fireball was okay. How
17	would I explain?
18	(Pause)
19	MR. WIEMEYER: Compared to the size of a
20	dime compared to the size of a softball? Or something
21	larger than that?
22	MR. JOHNSON: No, much
23	MR. WIEMEYER: A basketball?
24	MR. JOHNSON: much larger. Much larger
25	than a basketball. Much larger than a I would say

1	it was about maybe the size of a weather balloon.
2	Like, if you if you put your hands together and make
3	a circle like this, it was probably about that big
4	(demonstrates with his hands). It was tremendous.
5	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Craig is this is an
6	editorial comment. Craig is circling his arms over his
7	head and showing a circular area of approximately 20
8	inches across. Okay.
9	And, again, so I have this very clearly,
10	would you describe the color of what you saw initially
11	and the color of the fireball, and any differences in
12	both color and pattern, that you observed.
13	MR. JOHNSON: The what I what I say is
14	the fireball, it was red and orange. But it was
15	intact. It you know, the there was no there
16	was no, like it was sort of a sort of like a
17	circle. It wasn't flaring or fluttering, or anything
18	like that. It was constant.
19	It was the object was constant until it
20	exploded. And when it exploded it it looked to me
21	it was, like, just bright and white, sort of.
22	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Subsequent to this you
23	said you went out to the site. Describe what that
24	sequence of events for me.
25	MR. JOHNSON: The helicopter came back in and

picked us up. They were out there already. It started 1 to get -- now it's starting to get dark. 2 I got all my rescue gear together and I got 3 another friend of mine. And we went back out. when -- as we were going out the whole site was -- the 5 ocean was just on fire, like you saw on the news. And 6 7 there was debris everywhere. And our flight had on night vision goggles. 8 So, we were searching -- we were searching off from the 9 10 burning wreckage, where everybody seemed to, like, clatter about. And there was all kinds of debris in 11 the water. A lot of little small debris and -- and --12 and a lot of -- a lot of bodies. 13 14 And we were -- we were marking bodies with 15 16 be concentrating on the burning area. And it took us 17 -- it took us, actually, a while to get them to come 18

chem lights. And trying to get the Coast Guard to come over and pick these people up. And everybody seemed to over and at least pick up some of these bodies that we were -- we were spotting.

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Now, the crew at that time was on night vision goggles. And myself and Shawn Brady [phonetic sp.] were the rescuers. So, when it got dark, you know, they were -- the crew -- the engineers were spotting the bodies and we were throwing the chem

1	lights. So, when it got dark we couldn't we
2	weren't we weren't seeing any anything, you know,
3	out there under at in the night, 'cause we
4	weren't on night vision goggles. The crew was.
5	MR. WIEMEYER: Of course, you didn't light up
6	there or anything 'cause they were using night vision
7	goggles to spot the
8	MR. JOHNSON: They were using night vision
9	goggles. When they spotted bodies we threw chem lights
10	out to to mark them 'cause by by this time it was
11	dark. It was pitch black out.
12	MR. WIEMEYER: Do you normally wear night
13	vision goggles in a situation like that?
14	MR. JOHNSON: When we're called out to go for
15	a rescue situation that night, and as fast as what we
16	did, and we knew, you know, that we were getting out
17	there in a hurry, it's wasn't necessary for us to be
18	on night vision goggles.
19	A rescue we weren't going to go in the
20	water. WE can't we can't we cannot we can't
21	leave the helicopter with with night vision goggles
22	on. So
23	MR. WIEMEYER: Oh, I understand. There
24	wasn't any of the bodies that you or the crew spotted
25	that there was any indication that you needed to leave

1	the helicopter
2	MR. JOHNSON: No. None whatsoever.
3	MR. WIEMEYER: in the water?
4	MR. JOHNSON: None whatsoever. From that
5	from that site I knew were were going out there to mark
6	mark whatever we could see. Because from the
7	altitude of the explosion and from the the speed of
8	it prior to the explosion, I knew that nobody
9	there's no way anybody could've survived that.
10	MR. WIEMEYER: On the floating bodies, what
11	was the general condition of the bodies that you
12	observed?
13	MR. JOHNSON: They from it they had
14	varied from listening to Dennis he was on night
15	vision goggles say there was an engineer and a PJ on
16	the right side of the helicopter, and a PJ on the left
17	side of the helicopter. With the doors open we could
18	see an object and then the the guys on the night
19	vision goggles would say, oh, there's another body. Or
20	that one doesn't have a head. Or, you know, that one's
21	missing a this and that.
22	So, we knew they were some disfigured.
23	Some some were intact.
24	MR. WIEMEYER: But there was only fire in
25	that area?

1	MR. JOHNSON: No, in the area where we were
2	we had spotted, most of a lot I would think a
3	lot of the the bodies initial bodies that we
4	spotted right away, they were away from the away
5	from the burning wreckage.
6	MR. WIEMEYER: If is your recall
7	sufficient at this point in time and I realize that
8	a great deal of time has passed could you draw me a
9	rough diagram of location of these things, in
10	relationship to each other? Would you feel comfortable
11	doing that?
12	MR. JOHNSON: No, I think I think that
13	I think that the the pilot and the co-pilot would
14	would be better off doing that for you.
15	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.
16	MR. JOHNSON: Because they were doing the
17	actual flying. And from the from the site. From
18	the fire site.
19	From the fire site the drift to me was
20	definitely head it was going west. The drift was
21	moving west. The pieces the bodies that we had
22	spotted, I I believe they were heading headed
23	west
24	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.
25	MR. JOHNSON: of the the wreckage.

1	And
2	MR. WIEMEYER: And to regress all the way
3	back to the beginning for just a moment I want to
4	fill in some light and weather information.
5	What were the light conditions at the time
6	that you first examined the place that you witnessed?
7	MR. JOHNSON: It was it was I would say
8	it was maybe a half an hour before dusk-type oper
9	you know, before the sun the sun went down. You
10	know.
11	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. What were the
12	visibility from this thing?
13	MR. JOHNSON: The visibility was clear. Very
14	clear.
15	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Clouds?
16	MR. JOHNSON: No. There was it was a
17	beautiful clear day, clear night. You know, prior to
18	night it was. It wasn't even night.
19	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Okay. Go on. Once you
20	got out in the area?
21	MR. JOHNSON: The search area?
22	MR. WIEMEYER: The search area the crewman
23	and the pilots were spotting things.
24	MR. JOHNSON: Right.
25	MR. WIEMEYER: And your purpose then was to?

1	MR. JOHNSON: My purpose was if there was any
2	survivors I was going to down the jump in the water.
3	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.
4	MR. JOHNSON: I had my wet suit on, my full
5	wet gear on. I was going to go pull somebody up.
6	Knowing that there wasn't anybody out there
7	my secondary job would be to help spot and find people
8	so I could people can recover them later on. So
9	MR. WIEMEYER: How long did you guys stay out
10	there?
11	MR. JOHNSON: We were out there for an hour
12	and a half to two hours, is what I recollect. We
13	would've stayed out longer, but they told us they
14	didn't want us in the area anymore because we were the
15	only crew on night vision goggles. And and and
16	the Coast Guard felt, for what you know, whatever
17	reasons they felt which, you know, totally blow my mind
18	to begin with, was that we were we were more of a
19	hazard in the search area than they were, although we
20	could see things that nobody else could see away from
21	the burning from the burning ocean.
22	So, you know, I don't know how you know,
23	that didn't make sense to me having having all
24	having us on night vision goggles and spotting I
25	actually think they were annoyed that we were we

1	were spotting, you know, people in the water and that
2	and that and that we were asking them to come and
3	recover them. And I think that annoyed them.
4	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Were you on the ICS and
5	radio? Did you have headphones on?
6	MR. JOHNSON: Yes.
7	MR. WIEMEYER: So you could hear what was
8	going on?
9	MR. JOHNSON: Right.
10	MR. WIEMEYER: Did you hear other aircraft in
11	the area talking to either the 130 or the helicopter?
12	Or
13	MR. JOHNSON: No, I was just concerned with
14	our inter-crew and other flying objects around us. You
15	know, that's another one of scanning was another one
16	of my jobs, and making sure we weren't going to run
17	into into another airplane as I'm looking down
18	also.
19	MR. WIEMEYER: And you stayed out there about
20	how long?
21	MR. JOHNSON: On the hell we were out
22	there for, I would say, an hour and 45 minutes to two
23	hours.
24	MR. WIEMEYER: And then you came back

MR. JOHNSON: Came back --

25

1	MR. WIEMEYER: here?
2	MR. JOHNSON: here. And
3	MR. WIEMEYER: Did you launch a second time?
4	MR. JOHNSON: No. We never launched
5	again after that. For whatever reason? I have no
6	idea. We have the the crew. We have we have
7	night vision goggles. At that time we could've all
8	goggled up and went back out again.
9	MR. WIEMEYER: Are you changing the issue now
10	you're just going
11	MR. JOHNSON: Yes.
12	MR. WIEMEYER: off?
13	MR. JOHNSON: Yes.
14	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. What kind of a debrief
15	did you go through and with whom, after your arrival
16	back here?
17	MR. JOHNSON: After my arrival back here,
18	being that I knew that I had seen the the accident
19	prior to the explosion, which I I felt most people
20	would've just seen the big fireball explosion, and then
21	looked up and said, wow, what was that?
22	Knowing that I had seen it prior to it
23	exploding, I felt that I should sit down and write down
24	and my exact recollection of what happened that night,
25	so that it could be useful in any later on

1	investigation that that might be
2	MR. WIEMEYER: When did you talk to the
3	person from the FAA?
4	MR. JOHNSON: That was Col. Chuck Stevey.
5	He's a C-130 pilot here.
6	And immediately after I landed I well,
7	maybe 45 minutes, after we did everybody else's
8	interviews. WE sat down sat down with him. From an
9	FAA standpoint he asked me questions. And asked me
10	pretty much the same things that you're asking me right
11	now, but it was a lot clearer that night.
12	And I drew a little map and, you know, showed
13	him exact exact where where from where I was and
14	where I thought everything, you know, had occurred.
15	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. When was your first
16	contact with the FBI, then?
17	MR. JOHNSON: My first contact with the FBI
18	did not come 'til days days into the into the
19	investigation and the whole hoopla with the reporters
20	and and everything else.
21	MR. WIEMEYER: Have you made public
22	appearances in
23	MR. JOHNSON: Yes, I went out to the Coast
24	Guard station and told a few of the reporters out there
25	exactly what I what I told you. They had they

1	were trying to ask me about objects coming from the
2	ground, and all that. And I told them, no, in my
3	opinion, you know, what I had seen was that airplane
4	coming from out to descending down to an explosion,
5	fireball. And that's what I know I had seen. I was
6	absolutely positively seen that is what I saw.
7	MR. WIEMEYER: And you think what probably
8	attracted your attention was that initial flash of
9	light, whatever that was?
10	MR. JOHNSON: Whatever yes. It for
11	For me to look up into the big blue sky and see this
12	object, you know, and watch it for as long as I did
13	I know I just didn't, like, look up there and all of
14	sudden it came out of nowhere, because because I
15	thought the altitude that I first spotted I I was
16	saying it had to be nine, 10,000 feet.
17	MR. WIEMEYER: Is it possible in reviewing
18	this in your mind that the object that you viewed
19	initially was not the air was not the same object
20	that created the large fireball?
21	MR. JOHNSON: No. No
22	MR. WIEMEYER: They were both
23	MR. JOHNSON: Absolutely
24	MR. WIEMEYER: one and the same?
25	MR. JOHNSON: positive. I made that

1	statement, you know, initially also. That the
2	explosion came from and this is what I told the FBI
3	guys, too. That explosion came from the object that I
4	had seen coming down out of the sky. Without a doubt
5	in my mind, it it it originated from the falling
6	object. The explosion originated from the falling
7	object. I know that for a fact.
8	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. Is there anything else
9	that you want to add that I haven't asked?
10	MR. WIEMEYER: No, except the fact that I
11	I felt like you know, all of us we had the first
12	helicopter on-scene there; we had the first C-130 on-
13	scene. We had, you know, look trained military guys
14	who were trained at jumping at altitude, knowing
15	altitude and knowing all this other stuff, and it
16	seemed like I was frustrated here because I felt like I
17	had a lot more to offer to the investigation.
18	And it just seemed too too too late.
19	And if it wasn't for our own people coming together and
20	saying, we gotta write down what we saw 'cause it might
21	help later on, I felt a lot of the information would've
22	been lost totally, which is in my mind you know, if
23	you've got the first people on-scene, whether it's a
24	plane or a helicopter, you know, those people need to
25	be sat with immediately following with the right

1	officials whether it be, you know, this you guys,
2	or the FBI, or whoever it might be.
3	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay.
4	MR. JOHNSON: Or everybody. Nobody should
5	have one one crack at them when we're only going to
6	to you know, use you. Everybody who's involved in
7	an investigation especially one with the magnitude
8	that this one.
9	You know, I knew there was a plane that
LO	exploded out there. But I had no idea that it was a
11	you know, a big airliner with that many people on it.
12	MR. WIEMEYER: When did you become aware that
13	it was a 747 that
14	MR. WIEMEYER: When the
15	MR. WIEMEYER: here?
16	MR. JOHNSON: helicopter came back to me
17	up and they had been out there already searching prior
L8	to it getting dark prior 'cause they they came
19	back to get us in case there was any survivors. They
20	came back and said we think that this was a TWA from
21	from the Tower saying that a TWA airplane had vanished.
22	So, we think that this was a very large airplane.
23	And then when we were out there with the fire
24	and the pieces and the bodies, we knew that there was
25	this was a big airliner. You know. From the size

1	of the explosion I I figured it had to be something
2	big. But not for once I I didn't think for once
3	in my mind that, you know, it was going to be as big as
4	what it was and as many people involved.
5	MR. WIEMEYER: Okay. If you don't have
6	anything else, I think that will conclude the
7	interview.
8	(Whereupon, the interview was concluded [no
9	time noted.].)
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